

As Fate Would Have It

by uponagraydawn

Category: Brave, 2012, How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Hiccup, Merida

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-06-07 20:13:56

Updated: 2013-06-09 20:47:41

Packaged: 2016-04-26 15:16:29

Rating: K+

Chapters: 2

Words: 7,691

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Vikings and Highlanders have never gotten along, and the only thing keeping them from war is an unstable peace treaty. When the time comes to renegotiate the terms of the treaty, both rulers decide it's time for their heirs to join them. But neither are very interested in politics. Could an accidental meeting spark a war? Or could it be the reconciliation they need?

1. Chapter 1

****Hi there! Thanks for checking out my story! ****

****Disclaimer: Obviously I do not claim the rights to either movie, as they do not belong to me.****

****This takes place after HTTYD and _before_ Brave, just to clear that up. ****

****Hope you enjoy!****

*** * ***

><p>Hiccup woke up extra early that morning to find it was a beautiful day for guests.<p>

And by beautiful, he meant completely nasty.

Because this was Berk, and beautiful weather was something of a rarity. Especially at this time of year following a while after Snoggletog. There had been a thick blanket of snow on the ground when he went to bed, but when he looked out the window he saw it had melted a bit overnight. With the weather just beginning to warm up, everything would be slush for the next few weeks. Now, instead of snow, cold rain was drumming on the roof over his head in a steady, rhythmic pattern that Hiccup normally would've found soothing. If today hadn't been so important he could have enjoyed it. At least it

wouldn't be snowing again.

Something else was drumming on the roof too, something familiar. Hiccup smiled lopsidedly. _Guess Toothless wants to go flying despite the rain after all. _He felt a surge of regret as he crawled out of bed, knowing he would have to tell his friend today was a no-go. He pulled on his fur vest and secured the prosthetic foot to his leg before taking the thick cloak off a peg on the wall. It had been a Snoggletog gift from his father, and would come in very handy today. He decided to put on his helmet as well, thinking Stoick would probably want him to wear it anyway.

Rubbing the bleariness from his eyes, he descended the wooden stairs to the first floor and stopped. The giant firepot in the middle of the room was cold and empty and dark. The house was silent except for the distant thud of Toothless on the roof.

"Dad?" Hiccup called, walking towards the door.

No answer. Well, he shouldn't be surprised. Of course Stoick would be gone already. He had always hated this day, even though it didn't come around very often. He was probably in the Great Hall, conversing with the Tribe Elders.

When Hiccup stepped outside, he could feel the anxiety in the cold, damp air. No one in the Tribe was fond of this day when it came. It put the Vikings in a very bad mood, which was never a good thing. Some liked to spend the day hunting instead of staying in the village, while others didn't even leave their homes. Hiccup didn't blame them. Before this year, he'd been in the habit of disappearing into the woods or staying holed up in the forge all day. But a few days ago, Stoick said he wanted Hiccup to join him in the negotiations. At first he'd tried to refuse, thinking of anything he could say to get out of it, but his father insisted.

"If you're going to be Chief of this Tribe someday, you'll have to do this too," he'd argued in his thickly accented voice. "It's important that you learn, and you're old enough this year."

Hiccup, of course, knew what he really meant by that. _This is the first year I haven't been embarrassed of you or afraid that you'll mess it up. _That wasn't what bothered him, though. He tried asking why he couldn't wait until the next time the meeting rolled around, but he already knew the answer to that.

It was because, this time, the king from the Mainland had decided to bring his daughter along. Apparently she had been recently engaged and was training to be a future ruler as well. And she was around Hiccup's age, so Stoick had thought it appropriate to bring his son along for the first time too.

Thinking about it got Hiccup's nerves worked up. He really, _really_ hoped he wouldn't make a mess of this. It was such a delicate matter, and those were things he had never been particularly good with.

He pulled the collar of his cloak up to shield his face from the freezing rain, being careful of ice as he made his way around to the side of the house. The great black dragon was perched on the edge of the roof, waiting patiently for his rider. When Hiccup came into view, he hopped to the ground with a thud and nudged his chest in

greeting.

Hiccup scratched his cold, wet scales. "Morning, bud."

Toothless bounded over to the riding harness that he'd apparently dragged out from where Hiccup kept it in the shed and pawed at it rather impatiently.

The Viking boy's shoulders drooped as he sighed. "Sorry, Toothless. Today's kind of a—ah—" He wiped some rainwater from his eyes. "Well, today's kind of important. We can't go flying. I'm sorry, bud."

Toothless tilted his head and uttered a sad, warbling note, motioning again to the saddle.

"I know, I know," Hiccup said, stooping to pick it up off the cold, soggy ground. "I'd love to go out all day, trust me. But unfortunately that's not an option. I promise we'll go for an extra long ride tomorrow, though."

The dragon huffed, clearly not happy with the plan, but followed Hiccup obediently as he went to put away the saddle. Luckily the rain had slowed to a light drizzle before it soaked completely through the cloak. As he'd thought, it was starting to turn the snow into slush. Hiccup hoped it wouldn't freeze back over.

Every second he was dreading the day ahead more and more. He and the other teenagers knew what they had to do, but none of them wanted to do it. Hiccup felt like it would be some sort of betrayal to order Toothless to stay out of sight for an entire day. _This is too important to risk_, he reminded himself. He shuddered to think of what would happen if the Mainlanders saw the dragons in the village. Still, it didn't make the task any easier.

"Hiccup," a familiar voice called as he finished stowing the harness away in the shed next to his house. "Stoick wants to see you in the Great Hall."

Hiccup's thin shoulders dropped for the second time in five minutes. He turned to see Gobber hobbling toward him, wrapped up in his own fur coat. "I figured he would. Is it about the dragons or the negotiations?"

"Probably both," the old Viking mused, tugging at one end of his drooping moustache. "I think he's planning on lettin' the others do most of the work with the dragons, though."

"Yeah, _that's_ smart," he mumbled with a roll of his eyes.

"It is, actually. I think the business in the Hall is a wee bit more important for you to be spendin' time focusing on, don't you?"

His stomach clenched with nausea. He'd never felt so—responsible for the Tribe before, or important to its future. And to be honest, he wasn't sure he liked it. He still wasn't used to feeling important or responsible at all.

"Anyway, you'd better get goin'." Gobber jerked a thumb in the direction of the Great Hall. "He's not in a particularly patient mood

today. Try not to do anything stupid."

Hiccup rolled his eyes again. "Do you think I want to get us all killed?"

The big Viking chuckled and patted his shoulder with his flesh hand, but Hiccup noted that the gesture was more tense and forced than usual. The anxiety must be getting to him too, even if he tried hard not to show it.

"Where are you going?" Hiccup asked as he sauntered away.

"To check with the lookouts," he replied over his hunched shoulder. "Don't want to miss any sails on the horizon."

Hiccup knew he was just looking for ways to be useful while they waited on the ships, and he didn't blame the man. Today everyone was antsy and on-edge. As he turned in the direction of the hall, he swallowed back another bout of nerves. He wasn't looking forward to joining his father. Stoick wasn't much fun to be around when he was stressed and angry. Both of which he would be today, no doubt.

He felt a worried nudge under his arm and looked back to see Toothless staring at him with wide, round eyes.

"It's okay, bud," he tried to assure him. "We just have some company coming today from the Mainland and—well, they're not the biggest fans of Vikings. And Vikings don't like them much, either. So you and Stormfly and Hookfang and the other dragons are gonna spend the day in the woods with Astrid and them, okay?"

Toothless pushed his muzzle into Hiccup's shoulder again in a questioning manner.

"No, I can't go." He put his hands on both sides of the Night Fury's head and sighed ruefully. How were you supposed to explain this to a dragon without it sounding like abandonment? "I'm sorry, Toothless. Dad needs me to stay here. But I'll come get you as soon as I can, all right?"

Toothless seemed to accept that and gave another low bray.

Hiccup scratched under his chin in his favorite spot, watching as the dragon's eyes rolled back in delight. "I'll see you in a little while, bud. Now go and find Astrid, all right?"

He didn't look at Toothless again as he turned to make his way to the Hall. It broke his heart to have to leave him like this, but not every day could be spent doing fun things like flying and playing games.

When he passed through the huge, heavy oak doors, the first thing he noticed was the tension that hung in the room like a strong odor. There may have been some odor too, but it was well hidden under the trepidation that was so thick it was almost tangible. Firelight played on the walls, shadows jumping and flitting along with the flames of the torches. The Elders and military leaders of the Tribe stood in a huddle at the end of the long table, their faces grim and scowling.

His father's most of all.

They didn't even notice Hiccup as he approached tentatively, afraid that any sudden noise might get an axe thrown at his head. But once he was a few feet away, Stoick's head lifted and their eyes met. Some of the tension in his face seemed to melt a little at the sight of his son.

"Ah, Hiccup," he greeted, stepping away from the group. "I need to speak with you."

"What do you want me to do about the dragons?" Hiccup asked.

Stoick laid a massive hand on his son's back and steered him toward the front of the room. "Nothing. I already talked to Astrid and she's getting a group ready to take care of it."

"But—" He was always the one to handle the dragons. Dragons were his area, after all.

"I know, I know. I would've let you do it, but I need you here. We've got Chief business to take care of, and that comes before dragons. I'm sorry, Son."

Hiccup sighed in regret. He couldn't wait for this day to be over and done with.

"Let's step outside," Stoick directed, and proceeded to push open the heavy door with one shove.

A blast of cold air made Hiccup shiver, but he noticed it did seem considerably warmer. The sky was still dark and gray with clouds, but the rain had almost come to a complete stop. The ground was damp with melting snow.

"Looks like the winter spirit finally decided to leave us alone," Stoick remarked as he kicked a bit of mud off his boot, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

"Yeah," Hiccup deadpanned with his signature dry humor and a shake of his head. "Let's just hope he doesn't decide to come back."

Father and son wandered away from the Great Hall slowly, silence filling the gap between them. Until Stoick finally said, "Hiccup, I'm sure you know what's at stake here."

The Viking boy shrugged sarcastically, and then looked up at his father with a sober expression. "I've only lived here my whole life, Dad. Of course I do."

"And you know how serious being the Chief is."

"I know." Hiccup didn't like all this adult talk. In the back of his mind he'd always known that one day he would have to start stepping up to the duties of being the leader of the village, but it had always seemed so far away. Now that some responsibility was being laid on his shoulders, he wasn't sure he was ready for it. But his father was counting on him. And he was sixteen years old already. He could do this.

Stoick had already gone over what was to take place later that day. The actual negotiations shouldn't take that long. It was mainly the formalities that they had to worry about.

"I don't know what kind of king Fergus is back on the Mainland," the Chieftain told him as they walked. "But when he's in Berk he has always beenâ€|ahâ€|irritable. Reasonable and level-headed for the most part, but irritable." Hiccup watched his dad's face grow angrier as he spoke. "And if the least little thing is out of place, you can bet he'll say somethin' about it. He's rude and thinks he's so much _better _than us just becauseâ€""

"Dad, _you're_ going to be reasonable and level-headed too, right?" Hiccup interrupted, trying to sound calming.

"Of course _I_ am!" Stoick bellowed, fists clenching. "It's _him_ you have to worry about. Always acting like he owns the place because of one tiny little pillage on his precious Clan. You'd think he would've forgotten by now, but no, of course not. Not even after _everything's_ been paid back. I swear, sometimes I think we shouldâ€""

"And all this time I thought you were trying _not_ to start a war," Hiccup quipped.

Stoick stopped and stared at him for a moment. Then he softened as the anger drained from his posture. He laughed humorlessly. "You're right, Son. I'm sorry. This whole business is just taking a toll on me."

"I know, Dad. And I know you don't like each other, but you have to stay calm." Hiccup shrugged again. "Because, let's be honest. We both know Vikings have really bad tempers."

The Chieftain laughed again, this time a little more easily, and patted Hiccup on the shoulder. "See, this is why you'll make a great Chief someday. I'm glad you'll be there today."

Hiccup smiled at his dad, but internally he was even more worried than before. He knew what kind of temper Stoick had. And from what he heard, King Fergus had one too. The two groups had always naturally butted heads, but things had been so much worse since the attack.

A long time ago, when Stoick was a young man about to become Chieftain, the Vikings had conducted a rather brutal raid on the coast of the Mainland. Stoick argued that it had been necessary, that the Tribe was in danger of starvation thanks to dragon attacks and there was no other option. Fergus, the young, recently crowned king that ruled over the town that was attacked had not been happy. Not at all. Fierce battles ensued, but it wasn't long before the Mainlanders had wiped out over half the Viking army, forcing them to surrender. Surrender was not a thing Vikings gave into easily. When Stoick had been explaining this bit of history to Hiccup, he'd insisted fervently that it was the only way to avoid the Tribe's extinction. Hiccup believed it. Most Vikings would rather die painful, gruesome deaths than to surrender to the enemy.

When Stoick came to power a short time later, he somehow managed to strike a truce with Fergus. But the war, of course, was blamed entirely on the Vikings and the terms of the peace treaty forced them

to pay restitution for the extensive damage the pillages and the battles had caused. Stoick had been in no position to bargain, and with the ongoing war with the dragons another with the Mainlanders would surely be devastating, so he grudgingly agreed. The compensation had been paid back years ago, but King Fergus continued to visit Berk every other winter to renegotiate the terms of the peace treaty that was, miraculously, still fairly stable. How long it would last, though, Hiccup didn't know. Their bad blood ran way back even before Stoick and Fergus's rule so, needless to say, both rulers held a considerable amount of disdain for the other. The unsettled grudge was like gallons of gas and either Stoick's or Fergus's temper could be the spark to ignite it. Neither side wanted a war, but if their pride was insulted they wouldn't hesitate to make the first strike.

As was the Viking way, once enemies, always enemies. Except in the rare case of the dragons. But Hiccup doubted this issue could be resolved the same way.

He never suspected he might be wrong about that.

"You don't actually have to do anything during the meeting," Stoick continued. "Just be observant. And try to be civil to the king's daughter. You don't need to talk, but try not to be rude. We don't need another reason for them to be unhappy with us."

"Right." Hiccup's thin fingers fiddled with the sleeve of his cloak. Surely he couldn't do anything to upset the delicate state of peace between the two groups. He was just a scrawny, awkward teenager who wanted nothing more than to stay out of the way. But he was also the son of the Chieftain, and that meant people placed certain expectations on him. Expectations he might very well fail to meet. He hoped his father was past being embarrassed of him.

And as much as he didn't want to think about it, he was worried of what the princess would think of him too. He wasn't exactly the picture that came to mind when you thought of a chief's son. Hiccup told himself that, in the long run, it really didn't matter. Hopefully he wouldn't have to deal with her much in the future anyway.

Suddenly, the sound of a conch horn filled the air.

Stoick visibly tensed. "They're here."

* * *

><p>I'd love to hear feedback, if anyone's got any! Thanks for reading!

2. Chapter 2

Just a reminder that this story takes place before the events of Brave. Also, I have no idea what old Scottish marriage customs were, so in the course of the story if something is historically inaccurate I would be very grateful if you'd kindly point it out (:

**Thanks again for reading! **

* * *

><p>The Vikings who didn't want to stay in their homes assembled at the docks. Hiccup stood beside his father with shaking hands, watching as the sailsâ€"which were nothing more than specks at the momentâ€"grew closer. His friends were there behind him. They assured him that the dragons were happily situated at another part of the island where the Mainlanders wouldn't see them. Astrid said they would take turns going to check on their pets, but that was the least of Hiccup's worries at the moment. Although he really wished he had Toothless by his side.<p>

The minutes waiting for the ships to arrive dragged on for what felt like an eternity. The freezing winter wind and the churning sea were the only things that moved. Eventually Hiccup could make out the prows of the great ships. They were nicer and much more regal than the Vikings' crude longboats. Probably not as sturdy, and obviously not meant to survive merciless storms and dragon attacks, but better suited to carry royalty. The white sails were massive.

Hiccup held his breath as the first ship came in to dock. Some Viking men hurried to secure it to the pier. The gangway was lowered and the first of the Mainlanders made their way off of it. They were obviously Fergus's men, tall and strong, dressed in their traditional garb that included a lot of plaid, as well as fur cloaks. They carried weapons in plain sight at their hips.

Hiccup's knees trembled no matter how hard he tried to stop them. This would be the first time he had ever seen the Mainlanders up close. He'd never dared to get near them before, and Stoick hadn't wanted him to. As they filed off the ship, he had to admit that they looked rather impressive. They certainly had a lot more class than Vikings did.

They all watched grimly as wave after wave of Scots exited the ships. Finally, the king came. Hiccup knew he was coming even before he actually laid eyes on him. A team of soldiers marched down the gangway primly, wielding spears against their shoulders, obviously bodyguards of some kind. Then, behind them, walked a man of notable size, not unlike Stoick in stature. He had bushy red hair and was swathed in a dark cape. Instead of a crown, he wore a small metal helmet. All in all, he had a very intimidating appearance and certainly carried himself like a king.

Then Hiccup's eyes flitted to the person that was following shortly behind him. He could tell the figure was slender and feminine even under the black cloak she was wearing. He immediately guessed it was the princess. The hood of her cloak obscured her face, giving her a mysterious air that he really didn't like. Guards trailed behind in her wake like loyal dogs.

Hiccup's gaze was inexplicably transfixed on the girl as the entourage made its way across the docks to the shore where the Vikings waited. She walked straight and tall in a manner that was both self-assured and painfully forced. And somewhat intimidating, just like her father.

Stoick stood erect beside Hiccup, his eyes narrowed and cold. Hiccup had never seen him look so formidable, not even when fighting

dragons, and that was saying something. He gave his dad a nudge and, once he had his attention, drew a finger across his lips in a smile to remind him to appear friendlier.

It didn't help much. Vikings were very bad at hiding their hatred.

The air seemed to drop several degrees as Fergus approached quickly, obviously meaning business. The guards filed away in an orderly manner to let their ruler through, then stood stoically to the side.

"Stoick the Vast," King Fergus greeted coldly. He held out a large hand in a stiff, formal fashion.

Stoick accepted it politely, but Hiccup could tell there was no friendliness to the gesture. "King Fergus. Always a pleasure."

Hiccup winced.

"Always," Fergus echoed with a frown.

Stoick, seemingly realizing his little slip, hastily gestured to his son and said a little too cheerfully, "I'd like you to meet my son, Hiccup."

Fergus looked frighteningly large and menacing as he stretched out that same hand that could easily crush Hiccup's thin form if it wanted to. "Ah, it's nice to finally meet you, Hiccup."

Hiccup didn't know if he was hearing things, but the king's tone sounded a tad friendlier than it had when addressing his father. "You too, sir," he replied, shaking the meaty hand.

Fergus backed up and turned slightly. "I would like to introduce someone as well. My daughter, Princess Merida of DunBroch." He held out an arm to invite the dark-clothed figure to their circle.

Hiccup sucked in a deep breath and stood as tall as he could. This was it. The crucial moment that could mean the future of the Tribe. He suddenly wished he'd remembered to make sure his helmet was on straight. But more than that, he hoped the princess wouldn't be able to hear the furious pounding of his heart.

The girl stepped up next to her father and removed the hood from her face.

The first thing Hiccup noticed was round, blue eyes, the color of a clear sea. The second was fiery red hair pulled back into a rather bulky braid. A few tight curls poked out from it, as if they were trying to escape. In fact, the whole braid looked like it was struggling to stay together. A small gold tiara was embedded in the red curls on the top of her head, almost hidden by hair.

Hiccup wasn't sure what he'd expected the princess to look like, but it definitely hadn't been this. Her expression was serious and steely, but he could detect a small hint of defiance in those wide blue eyes. There was something wild and definitely not princess-like about her, though he couldn't put his finger on it right away. It

made Hiccup very curious all of the sudden.

"Princess Merida," Stoick said, breaking Hiccup's train of thought. He gave a small bow. "A pleasure to meet you."

"You as well," the girl returned in the same accent as her father. She dropped in a rather stiff, hasty curtsy, like she wasn't quite used to the motion.

"This," Stoick continued, reaching a hand back to push Hiccup farther forward, "is my son, Hiccup."

At this, the princess cracked a small smile, but recovered her stoic expression quickly. "Nice to meet you," Hiccup. Her voice hitched a bit on his name, and he knew she was secretly laughing at him. His cheeks burned.

She offered a hand and he shook it uncomfortably. "Don't be awkward, don't be awkward." In the back of his mind, he registered that her hand was, remarkably, smaller than his own. It was also unexpectedly rough and calloused. "It's, ah, nice to meet you too, Princess."

Merida sniffed, and suddenly all traces of friendliness that had been present an instant ago were gone. As the two teens turned to follow their fathers to the Great Hall, it seemed like she was making a point not to look at him.

Hiccup was pretty perceptive by Viking standards. Usually he could read people easily, figure out their personalities, but this girl honestly confused him. He hadn't known her for hardly two minutes, but he had already seen two sides of her that conflicted each other. She was no less of a mystery than she had been when he couldn't see her face, and something told him she would stay that way.

* * *

><p>Merida fiddled with the ring on her left hand incessantly. She hated it, hated the feel of it, with every fiber of her being. It had been there for over two months, but she still couldn't get used to it.<p>

She really only wore it when she was around people who would notice if it was missing. Which was, unfortunately, most of the time. But during those rare hours when she could be alone, the ring came off and her hand was free and bare, just the way it ought to be when it held a bow.

The wedding was a month away now. Merida tried not to think about it because the anxiety made her stomach roll with nausea. After many, many heated discussions with her mother, she'd finally consented to the marriage. It had taken a long, long time in which Merida used every trick, manipulation, excuse, and plea she could think of to avoid it, but Elinor proved she could be even more stubborn than her daughter. In the end, Merida knew she had no other choice but to give into the plans that had been made for her. In order to shut her mother up, she finally announced she'd chosen the MacGuffin lad to be her suitor.

In reality she had absolutely _no_ intentions of marrying the

boy.

True, he was preferable to the other suitors, mostly because she couldn't understand a word he said, but if anyone thought she was actually going to go through with this they were only fooling themselves. It was almost amusing how happy her parents got when she informed them of her decision. They were so quick and eager to believe she was really on board with the plans they had made for her. Fergus had looked relieved, very quick to take her at her word, and scooped her up into a hug while declaring his pride for her decision. Elinor had been slightly more skeptical of the submission, but Merida was able to convince her it was genuine. She had always been a good liar, after all.

Her mother had become absolutely elated as time went on and she began the tedious preparations for the marriage. As the wedding day drew closer, the castle became busier. Elinor was stressed, but clearly enjoying the mayhem. The triplets clearly had no clue as to why such a fuss was being made over their sister, but they were just enjoying the celebration feasts and desserts that came with them too much to care. Members of the other Clans, primarily MacGuffin, were coming and going constantly, dropping off gifts and visiting with the king and queen. The wedding dress was almost completed, and even Merida had to admit that it was beautiful.

Too bad she would never wear it.

Because for her, as her wedding day grew closer, the urge to run away became stronger and stronger. Merida hated the idea of being forever bonded to someone she didn't love (and could hardly tolerate for that matter) and forced into a position of leadership that she didn't want. She had never asked to be a princess, and yet she was expected to take over the Clans and rule with the grace and wisdom of her parents.

It was so ridiculous she almost snorted at the notion. _Her_, graceful and wise?

Despite the years of preparation shoved down her throat, she felt less ready than ever to be queen. Every day the idea of packing her things and vanishing into the woods became more enticing. She wanted out of the Highlands. Her parents would get over it eventually. They would find someone else to inherit the throne, someone much more qualified to rule a kingdom than her.

And she wouldn't have to risk disappointing them again.

That was why she was going to run away on the night before her wedding. It was the only escape she could think of. Arguing with her mother hadn't worked and, she concluded, never would, and goodness knew she couldn't count on her father for help. As much as she loved him, he took matters of the kingdom very seriously, and this was no exception. Angus was the only one she could turn to. And even a life of solitude in the wilderness of Scotland sounded better than one in the restrictive chains of monarchy. Mimicking her mother for the rest of her days? No, thank you.

The next month was her last taste of freedom, or what little freedom she had left at the castle before her life was changed forever. She tried her best to forget about the marriage and spent time secretly

planning her escape.

She'd discovered something strange, though, the more she thought about running away and the closer the day drew. At first she couldn't determine quite what it was. It started out as this strange, foreign feeling of apprehension that was little more than an uncomfortable nagging at the back of her mind. But slowly it grew, and now that the wedding was a month away she recognized it as fear. Well, maybe that was too strong a word. It was more like nervousness. Nervousness about running away and leaving everything she'd ever known to be on her own. She still didn't know what she would do once she left. It would take a long time to reach the boundaries of the Clans' territory and get to a town where no one would know her. Obviously money wasn't a problem, but she really had no clue where she would go.

Whenever these thoughts started to occupy her mind she pushed them away vehemently. She tried to make herself angry again by thinking about what her family was forcing her into, how they'd never even thought to ask her approval for this major milestone in her life. At the end of the day, she was always able to convince herself that running away was the much better option.

The marriage, however, seemed to make her parents want to push her into even more political responsibilities. Her lessons were focused less on proper etiquette and more on the actual ruling of the kingdom. That, of course, meant she spent more time with her father than before. Elinor obviously had much to teach in the way of the monarchy, but Fergus handled more of the diplomatic matters that were just as important.

And so it conveniently happened that the peace negotiations conducted every other year with the Vikings fell on that particular winter. Merida had been informed a week prior to it that she would be accompanying her father this time as a learning experience. Secretly, she was excited. Not to learn about diplomacy, but for the chance to see actual Vikings up close, to visit the island she'd heard so much about. She'd wanted to see Berk since she was a little girl and heard Fergus's many stories revolving around it. Her natural curiosity got the better of her in this instant.

But as the ships grew closer to the rocky shores of Berk, shrouded in a curtain of mist, she started to feel nervous. Yes, her father had told her many stories about his encounters with Vikings, but none of them were pleasant. She had never seen a Viking herself, so all she knew of them was what Fergus told her. According to him, they were massive, ruthless murderers, driven by nothing but their brutal and mindless appetite for bloodshed. He'd told her, rather bitterly, the story of how they had attacked the Clan when he was young and had only been king for less than a year. Everyone in the little village had been slaughtered, every item pilfered. The empty houses and corpse-filled streets had been left to burn in the wake of their torches.

"And for what?" Fergus had roared. "For their own pleasure! At least I've made sure they paid dearly for what they did. We may be at peace, but I'll never forgive for their crimes against our people. Stoick wouldn't dare to cross us again."

Merida had always been indifferent for the most part about the feud

with the Vikings. It wasn't a pressing problem, and it was entirely her father's business. She never really gave them much thought. From all she'd heard, they were mindless brutes that did what they pleased, and as long as they left the Clans alone, why should she care?

When she was younger, Fergus would always tell her horror tales about his battles with them. His stories spun them into horrible, primitive monsters that fought with giant axes, killed people without a second thought, and slayed dragons for activity.

Merida doubted that last bit. Her father tended to exaggerate his stories, and surely if there were dragons living that close to Scotland she would've seen _something _before, and she hadn't. But she believed the rest of it. Mostly. She knew the Vikings couldn't be quite so dangerous or Fergus wouldn't bring her along on this trip. But a trace of anxiety raced down her back as the ship had docked and she followed the king to the shore where they were waiting, their hulking forms looming like menacing boulders on the beach.

Her first impression of the Vikings had been exactly what she'd been expecting. Stoick the Vast was aptly named. He was every bit as big as her father, and Merida could easily picture him committing the crimes Fergus accused him of.

And then she was introduced to his son.

She was anticipating a barbarian. A massive, gruff, intimidating hulk of a teenager who was made entirely of muscle and dressed in spiky, dangerous armor, hefting a gigantic axe.

She never expectedâ€¦_this_.

The chief's son was rumored to be a hero. She'd never heard exactly what he was heroic for, but it was only logical of her to assume he would be a battle-hardened warrior, right?

Apparently she was wrong again.

Instead of a great warrior, she found herself being introduced to a lanky, freckled boy with auburn hair and intelligent green eyes who barely reached her own height. He was awkward and stutteringâ€¦and his name was _Hiccup. _Honestly, what kind of parent named their son Hiccup? It was all Merida could do to keep from bursting into an ugly fit of laughter. He was exactly the opposite of what she'd been expecting and defied positively everything her father had told her about Vikings, apart from the helmet that sat lopsided on his head. Go figure.

As she shook his hand, she noticed there was something about his gaze. It was bashful and modest, but there was a certain insightfulness to it, as if he could see right through her. Merida could tell he was smart, and for some reason she found that intriguing. Vikings weren't supposed to be smart. And to further his anti-stereotypical demeanor, he struck her as a likable type.

So she made an effort to avoid his eyes. Scrawny or not, he was still a Viking and the son of her father's enemy. The future ruler of the island she stood on at that moment. Besides, that impression could be wrong. He was probably annoying and wimpy. In a way, she was glad he

was the one inheriting his father's place as Chief instead of a burly warrior. Most likely he wouldn't be any sort of threat. She would be able to deal with him easily.

As the party made their way to the meeting hall, she walked slightly ahead of him and took in her surroundings, the place the Vikings lived. It certainly was bleak. There was melting snow piled against the sides of the houses, crude wooden things that didn't look comfortable at all. At least they seemed sturdy. The terrain was gravelly and sloping. On the boat ride, she had seen towering rock spires and dead-looking forests, but the village seemed to be clear of those. The buildings matched her impression of the Vikings' primitiveness. Rough-hewn weapons leaned against the walls. Merida didn't have any doubt that their owners knew how to use them. This place was utterly barbaric.

Then she noticed the faces peeking out from behind partially opened shutters, looking at her. A shiver ran down her spine. It really hit her for the first time that the Vikings must hate the Scots as much as the Scots hated the Vikings. Surely they wouldn't try anything. They wouldn't want to start a war. Would they? Then again—if their bloodlust was as potent as Fergus made it out to be, the possibility might be high. Merida hurried to be closer to her father.

She could feel someone else watching her as she walked, a distinctly different kind of feeling than that which came from the eyes peeking through windows. It felt curious and calculating, not hateful and scrutinizing. She had a horrible feeling it was the Chief's son. To distract herself, she tried to recall all that Elinor had made sure to repeat for the thousandth time before she left.

"Walk tall, shoulders back, chin up," her mother had chanted yet again. "And for heaven's sake, keep your back straight! Don't slouch. There is nothing uglier than poor posture, Merida." Of course, she paced slowly across the room while talking to demonstrate. "Be dignified and refined. Do not speak unless directly spoken to. That means no outbursts, you hear? This meeting is extremely important to your father."

Merida had acknowledged the commands with a very unladylike grunt, which, of course, earned her a disapproving scowl from Elinor.

The queen insisted on dressing her daughter up for this occasion, saying that she had to make a good impression on the Vikings since she would be dealing with them in the future. Thankfully Merida had talked her out of stuffing her into that satin blue dress she hated so much. Instead she had been stuffed into a green gown that was every bit as tight and suffocating. Elinor decided to leave her hair out, but for some reason couldn't be satisfied with just leaving it the way it was. Getting Merida's hair to do anything was nearly impossible since it always refused to cooperate, but eventually her mother had wrestled the unruly curls into a decent looking braid and added the godforsaken tiara that Merida still couldn't fathom the purpose of.

Merida let her do it, though, with as little complaint as she could muster because she knew how important it was to the woman. Even if one of her first political experiences as future queen was a meeting somewhere as barbaric as Berk, it still made her mother glow with pride. Even Merida didn't have the heart to struggle against her

attempts to make her look like a princess. She figured she could at least allow her this since she wouldn't be here for the wedding.

That still didn't prevent her from not caring about the mud that was collecting on the hem of the dress.

The walk to the meeting hall was short. Soon she found herself standing beside Fergus before a giant set of heavy wooden doors that led into a roughly painted building just bigger than the houses she'd passed.

They waited with their soldiers for the Vikings to open the doors. Hulking men dressed in obscene amounts of fur yanked on the handles, a rusty groan escaping the giant hinges. They opened to reveal a vast, dark room inside. The only light came from torches hanging in sconces on the thick pillars holding up the roof and a blazing fire in the middle of an incredibly large, long table. The edges of the room were lost in dark shadow, but at least it was warm.

Merida and her father waited for Stoick to lead them to the end of the table. She could feel the heat from all the fire warming her cheeks and soon shed her cloak, revealing the deep green formal gown. The silken fabric swished around her legs as she walked, muddied hem brushing the floor.

The Viking men motioned wordlessly at where they were to sit. Merida looked distastefully at the splintering wooden chair, but sat with as much grace as she could muster when one warrior pulled it out for her. She was placed further down the table from her father. He was surrounded by his advisors and soldiers. She was there merely as a spectator so it was unnecessary for her to sit directly next to him.

Her fingers drummed impatiently on the wooden tabletop. She tried to keep her back straight, but at the moment only felt a strong urge to slump back against the chair. Something told her she was about to sit through a very long, very boring meeting.

With her thoughts directed elsewhere, she was startled when she felt someone watching her again. Her gaze shifted to the other side of the table, only to meet the green eyes of the chief's son looking straight at her. As soon as their eyes met, the boy blushed rather inconspicuously and turned his head away. Merida tried to keep the smile tugging at her lips hidden. Something about his mannerisms just made her want burst into laughter.

Undaunted by the awkward interaction, she kept her eyes locked on him, mostly just to see what he would do. It took a moment for him to risk another sideways glance in her direction, and when he did he looked back twice, as if he wasn't expecting her to still be watching him. His blush deepened to a dark shade of scarlet. Merida continued to stare. It took an amazing amount of self-control for her to keep a straight face. He was so obviously uncomfortable, and she'd always had a bad habit of teasing people who were easily flustered. That was the only thing she had even remotely enjoyed about watching her suitors compete against one another in the games.

Somehow, she managed to keep her gaze on Hiccup even and unwavering. She watched him swallow, his hands fiddling with each other on the

edge of the table. His eyes flitted about in different directions, but refused to return to her. And still she stared, enjoying seeing him squirm under the pinpoint of her blue orbs far too much.

Until the meeting was called to order.

End
file.